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PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements

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1-1-1959

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Abraham John Muste

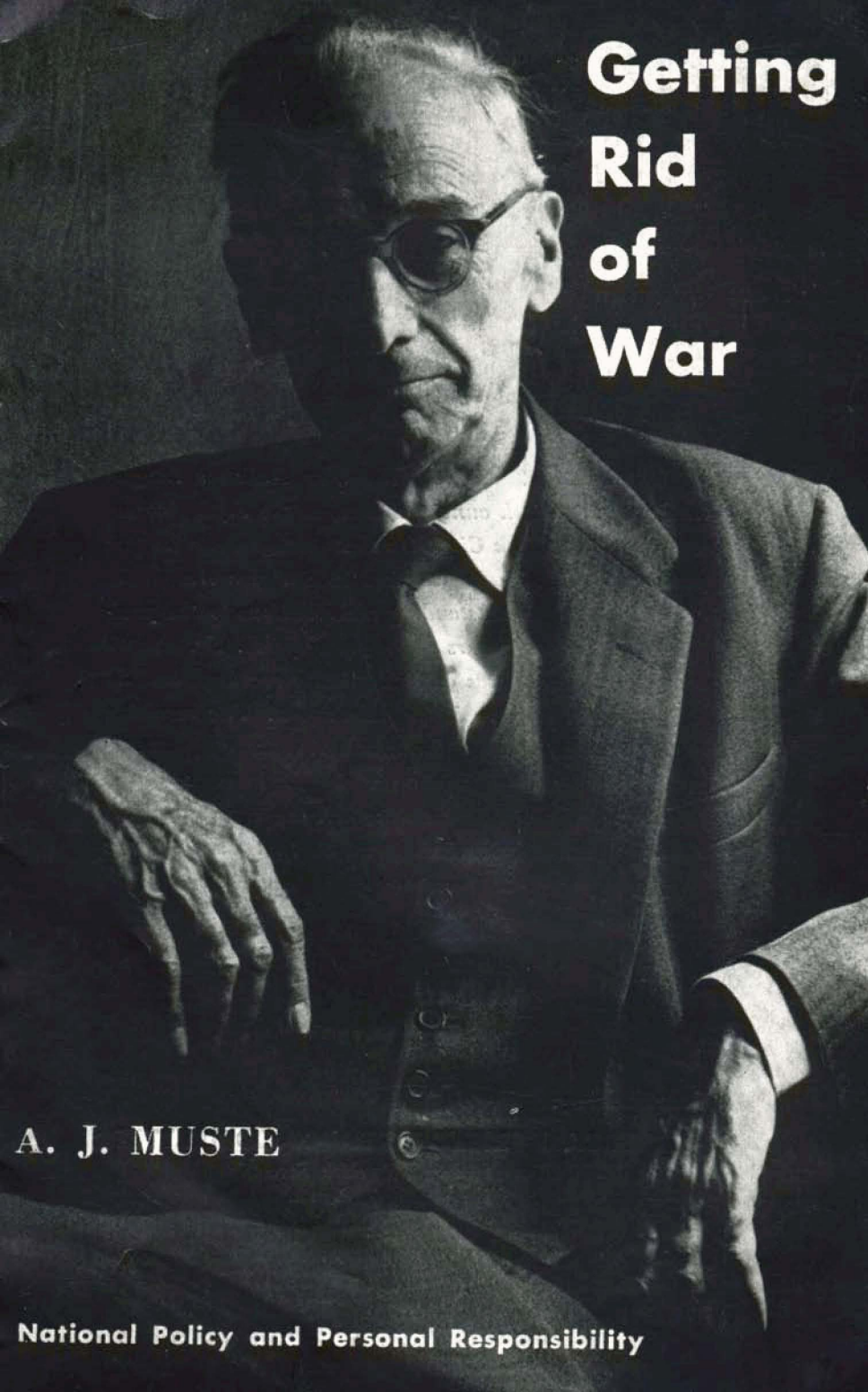
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### Recommended Citation

Muste, Abraham John, "Getting rid of war: National policy and personal responsibility" (1959). *PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements*. 435.  
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# Getting Rid of War

A. J. MUSTE

National Policy and Personal Responsibility

*On February 2nd, 1959, the War Resisters League held its thirty-sixth annual dinner, at the Fifth Avenue Hotel, in New York City. On that occasion, the League presented A. J. Muste with its 1958 Peace Award, in recognition of his outstanding contributions to the pacifist cause for many years and in many fields. Dr. Muste's acceptance speech was enthusiastically received, and he was asked to prepare it for publication. The resulting article was featured in the March 1959 issue of LIBERATION, and has been widely acclaimed. In view of the urgency of the problem with which the article deals, it now appears in pamphlet form, so that its challenge may be presented to the widest possible audience.*

**Distributed by:**

**AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE**

Twenty South Twelfth Street  
Philadelphia 7, Penna.

EVERY THOUGHTFUL PERSON wants to abolish war and the benumbing threat of nuclear war which hangs over all mankind. The question is how to do it. Here is an attempt to state one answer to that question. It is an answer which hitherto represented the view of a minority; but more and more people are beginning to think it is the only one that makes any sense or holds out real hope.

First, we must try to see the nature of the problem. The international political scene today has two main characteristics. It is marked on the one hand by terrific, dizzying movement in the field of military technology, the development of weapons of extermination. There is, on the other hand, extreme rigidity in the political field, at the point of struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union, the western and eastern power blocs.

As for the first, the A-Bomb now seems like something out of the Middle Ages in the context of missile development, the firing of satellites to orbit the earth, the catapulting of satellites into outer space—all directly tied in with war preparations on the part of both major powers.

As for political relationships, on the surface, of course, changes occur, or seem to occur, tension waxes and wanes and grows again, and it is clear that at the moment neither power wants a nuclear war; neither wants the situation anywhere to get completely out of hand. But no major political issues, as in Germany or in the Middle East or in the realm of disarmament, get settled. There is no indication that any are on the way to settlement.

I am not impressed in this connection with the struggle that goes on periodically between the White House and Congressional committees over whether a balanced budget or national security is of first importance. These are not struggles between pacifists and militarists, people who want or do not want "genuine negotiation". And however these controversies come out, the military budget will still be of astronomical proportions for

"peacetime", and intended to enable the United States to obliterate Russia if it should prove "necessary".

Both aspects of the contemporary situation make one think of mass hypnosis, mass hysteria or catalepsy. A short time ago, we were appalled at the thought that some bomber pilot would misread a signal on his radar screen, conclude that an enemy was taking hostile action, and touch off a nuclear war. Now Prof. William Pickering, the jet-missile expert of the California Institute of Technology, points out that it seems inevitable that technological military development will proceed fatalistically. The calculations now required are so intricate that they have to be made by super-calculating machines. A defect in a tube of such a machine here may lead to a wrong signal being received by a machine in Russia, or vice versa. This will automatically set missiles flying. Even if (Professor Pickering warns) a human observer realizes in a moment that a mistake has occurred, it will be too late to stop the machinery of extermination. Thus, hypnotically, the intricate dance goes on.

In the field of so-called negotiations between the powers, one gets the same impression of mental aberration, a flight from reality, in the immobility, the rigid stalemate, the utter failure of diplomats to communicate on controversial issues. Nations simply talk *at* each other like talking machines.

Note that this bound-to-be-catastrophic conjunction of violent movement in one field and stark rigidity in the other goes on in spite of the fact that the policy makers, generals, scientists, and opinion makers, including the clergy on both sides, know the nature of modern weapons and the character of the war in which they are to be used.

It is essential to note that *in this crucial respect* there is no difference between the leaders in the two rival blocs. Nuclear war is politically irrational and morally an indefensible and hideous atrocity, whoever perpetrates it. Preparation for such war is also politically irrational, and since there is no guarantee that the prep-



aration will lead to anything but war, the preparation itself is an atrocity and a degradation of mankind.

## **We Accuse Both**

I lay this charge at the doors of Eisenhower and Khrushchev, of Dulles and Gromyko; of the intellectuals of this country and of the Soviet Union and other Communist countries; of the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish teachers of the United States, and of the priests of whatever denomination in Russia.

The fact that on each side the claim about the end in view made by the government, and to a large extent accepted by the people, tends to be absolutistic—that the conflict is an ultimate one, for *the* Revolution which is finally to liberate mankind or for “all the values of democratic and Christian civilization” (even insofar as it is sincerely made and not sheer propagandist hypocrisy) does not mitigate the indictment. Not one of the professed aims of Communism (classless and warless world and the rest) or of the democratic and Christian faith (the sacredness and infinite worth of every human soul and what have you) not one of them can be advanced by or salvaged after a nuclear war.

The very arrogance which is revealed in this absolutizing—the infamous notion that *my* regime, *my* country, *my* philosophy is so precious that its defense justifies the obliteration of *an enemy people and quite possibly* wiping out the population of my own country as well—what can one say of this except that it is itself an extreme expression of the mental sickness and the foul moral degradation which has mankind, or at least its present leaders, in its grip?

Note, furthermore, that each of these regimes in the very preparation of nuclear war is alike in displaying the *impudence of exposing other peoples and even the future generations of other countries to genetic distortion and death by fall-out and other means.* Russia and the United States alike, if war ensues, will doom millions in other nations to death.

This charge, unprecedented in the history of man, lies now at the doors of Eisenhower and Khrushchev, Dulles and Gromyko, and the policy- and opinion-makers of both camps.

### **Retaliation Is Not Defense**

In the presence of the stark, central fact of what modern war means, the validity of the talk about defense on both sides: "We do these things because the other side is doing it", adds up to exactly zero. When mass retaliation is called defense, that is double-think and double-talk on both sides.

Parenthetically, this is not the only point at which both the United States and the Soviet Union need to see that the enemy is not the other nation, but war.

Nor is this the only point at which all of us need to see that the basic fact of international life today is no longer, if it ever was, the battle of the power blocs. It is increasingly the case that each is confronted by the same problems, perhaps in somewhat different form, including the ultimate problem of how the human spirit is to survive and, surviving, to enter into its heritage in the age of the fissioned and fused atom.

Similarly, most of the discussion about which government is making genuine peace offers, negotiating astutely or stupidly, and so on, is also pointless. All this negotiation takes place in the context of the nuclear arms race, and this is an activity of lunatics and global criminals. Neither side gives any indication of being ready to take any risk by withdrawing from this madness. When they stop this senselessness, then we can begin to apply sensible standards to their interminable negotiations.

### **The Opiate of Deterrence**

The situation is so full of peril that many fall back for consolation on the idea of deterrence: the very fact that weapons are so destructive is somehow going to prevent war. Some assert that we actually have a nuclear stalemate now, since general war has not yet broken out.

If the reader will take a historical stance for a moment, he may reflect on what a brand-new idea it is that weapons—the most intricate, expensive and deadly weapons—are made and stockpiled in an atmosphere of extreme tension, for the purpose of never being used. Each big nation turns out this stuff, we are asked to believe, with no notion of ever using it, but simply in order to keep the other fellow from using his. Surely this is an Alice in Wonderland notion. Raymond Swing long ago characterized this as the theory that “the bigger the danger grows, the greater the safety”. General Omar Bradley more recently stigmatized it as “peace by the accumulation of peril”. Any beginner in logic would point out that if it were guaranteed that nuclear weapons were not going to be used, their deterrent power would vanish.

Obviously, if there were any substance to the concept that we are now secure behind our deterrent shield, we’d feel it a little bit somewhere. We’d relax, take a deep breath. The fact is that the arms race spells tension and creates fear and tension. Brinkmanship is inevitably the foreign policy that is associated with such an arms race, and brinkmanship is not relaxing.

As a matter of fact, neither great power is seeking to achieve a *balance*. Each is constantly seeking to upset it. In this realm, perpetual motion is the aim. How little intention the “realists”, military and civilian, have of breaking out of the fixed pattern of violence against violence was, perhaps inadvertently, revealed by one of the experts of the Rand Corporation (which seems to be a sort of brain trust of the Defense Department), who wrote that precisely if an agreement were reached to “abolish” the weapons necessary in a general war, the need for a deterrent would be all the greater. For then “the violator could gain an overwhelming advantage from the concealment of even a few weapons. *The need for a deterrent . . . is ineradicable*”.

There is, then, no built-in, automatic safety factor in the nuclear power struggle. Modern technology is not equipped with a safety valve. The nature of modern war



may lead to the abolition of war, *provided* that men face the facts as to the abolition of war, and the rivalries of power states, and act upon the facts.

### **Needed—A New Pattern**

All this points, surely, to the conclusion that we cannot depend on the accustomed, traditional ways of thinking and of political behavior to save us. We have to find a new pattern of action. There has to be an illumination, a vision. This must lead to a moral and political decision, an act of the will.

It seems to me an inescapable conclusion, therefore, that we have, as a nation, or a people, to be ready to take *unilateral* action. Disarmament will not come out of "I will if you will" bargaining; it will come when some nation transposes "war must not be" from the conclusion of an analysis to which everybody agrees into the basis for national action.

We may put this another way: neither the Soviet Union nor the United States is going to force or cajole or trick the other into breaking out of the circle of suspicion and exposing itself to insecurity in the military power sense. They will certainly not coexist peacefully unless they change substantially. But the change in each case will have to come from within. The one can induce or encourage it in the other only by example, i. e., by unilateral action.

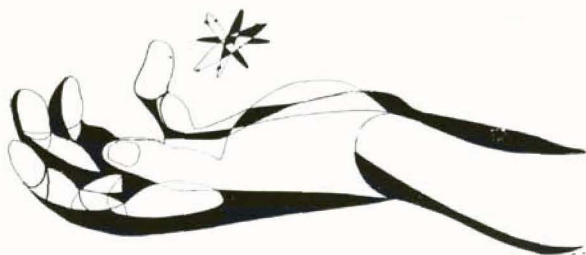
Something like a revolution, a rebirth of man, is necessary and you cannot say to the man across the fence: "I will be reborn, if you will—first". That's something entirely different: a bargain, a deal, not rebirth.

### **C. Wright Mills—Sociologist**

In face of all this, one of the most important developments in the struggle to end war is the fact that C. Wright Mills, Columbia University sociologist, and one of the best informed and most sophisticated analysts of political affairs, has recently come out for unilateral nuclear disarmament in a book called *The Causes of World War III*. For example, "the U. S. government

should at once and unilaterally cease all further production of 'experimental' weapons" and move to destroy or convert to peacetime uses its existing stocks. Mills similarly calls on the government to "abandon all military bases and installations outside the continental domain of the United States."

At another point, he nails down the case for unilateral action, saying: "It is less 'realistic' to spend more money on arms than to *stop at once—and, if must be, unilaterally*—all preparation of World War III. There is no other realism, no other necessity, no other need. If they do



not mean these things, necessity and need and realism are merely the desperate slogans of the morally crippled."

As soon as anyone starts to talk about the United States unilaterally getting rid of its nuclear weapons, the familiar questions bob up: "Are you going to let the Russians or Communists run over you? Would they try to do it? Could they?" There are a number of answers to such questions. Here we must confine ourselves to a couple of them.

The first is in a reference in Mills' book to one of those courageous top physicists who are on record as absolutely refusing to help equip their own country, West Germany, with nuclear weapons. Said Max Van Laue (not a pacifist), justifying this refusal against the charge that this was playing into the hands of the Soviets: "Suppose I live in a big apartment house and burglars attack me; I am allowed to defend myself and,

if need be, I may even shoot, *but under no circumstances may I blow up the house.* It is true that to do so would be an effective defense against the burglars, but the resulting evil would be much greater than any I could suffer. But what if the burglars have explosives to destroy the whole house? Then *I would leave them with the responsibility for the evil and would not contribute anything to it."*

In one sense, no other answer is needed. It is our contention that, whatever the provocation or the danger, there is no justification in heaven or on earth for our arms wiping out any other people, men, women, the aged and the babies, indiscriminately. If we have no words harsh enough for those who would do such a thing to us, what are we if we do it to others?

In the second place, the one way in which the sane and democratic elements in the Soviet Union would be encouraged, and the dictatorship undermined, would be by a United States which dared to risk sanity, which *acted* for peace, which established a true, racially integrated democracy here at home, and which backed the democratic revolutions in the underdeveloped countries so that their people would not find the Communists their only source of aid and leadership. In such a peaceful democracy, multitudes in the satellite countries would see an alternative to which they would be irresistibly drawn. By such a peaceful and genuine revolution, the faith of the uncommitted countries in us would be restored, and totalitarianism might be transformed, as it certainly will not be by war or threat of war.

### **George F. Kennan**

Here I want to call attention to a remarkable declaration by a world-famous political analyst, former U. S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, and head of the Policy Planning Committee of the State Department, George F. Kennan. In his *Russia, the Atom and the West*, probably the most widely discussed book on East-West relations to have appeared in 1958, Kennan writes:

What sort of a life is it to which these devotees of the weapons race would see us condemned? The technological realities of this competition are constantly changing from month to month and from year to year. Are we to flee like haunted creatures from one defensive device to another, each more costly and humiliating than the one before, cowering underground one day, breaking up our cities the next, attempting to surround ourselves with elaborate electronic shields on the third, concerned only to prolong the length of our lives while sacrificing all the values for which it might be worth while to live at all? If I thought this was the best the future held for us, I should be tempted to join those who say, "Let us divest ourselves of this weapon altogether; let us stake our safety on God's grace and our own good consciences and on that measure of common sense and humanity which even our adversaries possess; but then let us at least walk like men, with our heads up, so long as we are permitted to walk at all." We must not forget that this is actually the situation in which many of the peoples of this world are obliged to live today; and while I would not wish to say that they are now more secure than we are, for the fact that they do not hold these weapons, I would submit that they are more secure than we would be if we were to resign ourselves entirely to the negative dynamics of the weapons race, as many would have us do.

If things get bad enough as the weapons race runs its predestined course, Kennan would advise us to have the good sense and moral courage to take unilateral action, to follow the pacifist, nonviolent way. We would be *safer* doing that, this statesman contends, than if we "resign ourselves to the negative dynamics of the weapons race".

But surely the fact is that we are *now* caught in that negative and perilous dynamics. We are less likely to be able to break out if we get in any deeper. The more new nations get atomic weapons, the harder it gets to back out, the greater the risk of an irretrievable misstep and disaster. This *is* the best the future holds for us unless we *break away now before it is too late*. Now is the time for the American people to stake their safety on God's grace and their own good consciences and on that measure of common sense and humanity which even our enemies possess.



What is Mr. Kennan waiting for? What are any of us waiting for?

## Personal Responsibility

One final word. Whether or not the nation adopts any such course, the question of the personal responsibility of each of us must be faced by each of us and of our fellow-citizens. Here is another significant contribution of C. Wright Mills in the book from which we have already quoted.

In unequivocal terms, Mills calls upon all men and women, but especially on the intellectuals and the scientists, to become *conscientious objectors*. As for the scientists, "they ought unilaterally to withdraw from, and so abolish, the Science Machine as it now exists."

To the objection often heard that "if I don't do a certain war job, somebody else will," Mills retorts that that "this is less an argument than the mannerism of the irresponsible. It is based . . . upon the acceptance of your own impotence". He concludes:

My answers to this mannerism are: if you do not do it, you at least are not responsible for its being done. If you refuse to do so out loud, others may quietly refrain from doing it, and those who still do it may then do it only with hesitation and guilt . . . To refuse to do it is an act affirming yourself as a moral center of responsible decisions . . . it is the act of a man who rejects "fate", for it reveals the resolution of one human being to take at least his own fate into his own hands.

This challenge to each human being to take at least his own fate in his own hands in this matter of war is what the War Resisters League and other such organizations have been proclaiming these many decades. I submit that there has never been a time when the challenge came more insistently to each man and each woman, and when it was more appropriate to support the organizations which in an age of anxiety, apathy and conformity call on men each "to take at least his own fate into his own hands".